

Closing the HRM scholar-practitioner gap: Turning to the aesthetic experience in human resource selection*

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abstract

HR selection practice seems to differ from the way much existing literature theorizes about it, where emphasis is placed on the rational and measurable aspects of selection, creating an HR science-practitioner gap. This paper seeks to address this gap by introducing aesthetics to selection, adding non-rational and non-measurable aspects by investigating how practitioners select for aesthetic skills in practice. This is done through a practice-based study, emphasizing aesthetic experience in selection decisions made in situ in various projects within the Danish film industry. The findings of this paper show that aesthetic experience is inherently part of any selection decision, and that attempts to implement strictly rational means in practice cause confusion and inability to order candidates into a meaningful short list. These findings contribute to the debate about critical HRM by providing a more nuanced perspective on selection, seeking to close the gap between HRM practitioners and scholars.

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Introduction

This study seeks to challenge the way HR professionals and scholars think about HR selection, seeking to address the current gap between theory and the way HR practitioners practice employee selection. This links to the broader debate on managing the human, as human skills consist of more than that which can be measured through tests. The sparse theoretical insights on these matters is one essential explanation for the HR theory-practitioner gap (Rynes et al., 2002; Rynes et al., 2007; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014). The underlying assumption that HRM selection theory builds on is that of the human as a 'resource' that can be measured and managed in order to predict future job performance, however this has proven to be much more difficult in practice. Reducing the human to a measurable resource is a fallacy as it overstates the importance of aesthetics, a perspective that has increasingly been recognized in management literature (Springborg, 2010; Taylor and Ladkin, 2010; Springborg and Sutherland, 2014; Strati, 2010). Aesthetics is an essential and natural aspect of decision making in various work practices, such as medicine, firefighting, the armed services, law enforcement, airline traffic control and aviation (Langan-Fox and Vranic, 2011). It is also crucial in teaching practices (see for example Burke and Sadler-Smith, 2011; Kuhnle, 2011) or in the broader field of management executives (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004), and not least in HRM practices (Caudron, 2001).

In the past decades there has been an increasing professionalization of HRM practices in the western world (Bevort and Poulfelt, 2015). This has entailed a pressure to follow standard procedures, best-case practices and the use of tests (Iles and Robertson, 1995), based on validated methods provided by academics from the psychometric and competency based approaches, that are based on rational means. Likewise, there has been a theoretical push towards more test based HR selection (Lievens et al., 2002). Despite the illegitimacy of using informal selection practices, studies that look inside the practices of selection decisions show that HR professionals stubbornly emphasize the results from informal interviews when making selection decisions, compared to the results coming from the tests. This is despite research showing that using tests provides more valid results for retention (Highhouse, 2008; Lodato et al., 2011; Langhammer et al., 2012; Miles and Sadler-Smith, 2014).

Practitioner's pretense of performing science-based selection, while deviating from this approach in the actual practices performed, have created a gap between practitioners and academics, making it difficult for a fruitful mutual learning process to take place (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014). More recently scholars have intended to bridge this gap by questioning if the formalized processes, such as rational and 'one way fits all', test based and 'best-case practice' approaches in

selection actually capture how practitioners work with selection in practice. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) showed that decision makers in practice mutually adjusted their different versions of the candidate in light of temporal meanings of the persons' performance in relation to company standards. These insights are a step towards a more integrated framework that could be useful to practitioners, however this could be forged more strongly by adding the aesthetic experience that is inherent in practice (Gherardi, 2009). Aesthetics recognizes the fact that we know more than we can verbally express, measure through logically deduced arguments, and understand through tests. These non-scientific aspects such as intuition based selection became perceived as illegitimate and unprofessional, and hence most decision makers rationalize their choice after having made the decision based on intuition or 'gut feeling' earlier on in the process (Timming, 2011; Kreiner, 2012; Ambadi and Rosenthal, 1993; Silverman and Jones, 1973, 1976).

This paper contributes to the literature on critical HRM by bringing back the aesthetic experience to selection practices, showing how aesthetic experiences are essential in enabling the decision to be made. Aesthetics are inherently part of any selection process based on a more nuanced understanding, despite attempts to downplay these aspects formally (Mears, 2014; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). The paper provides insights into the role of aesthetics in selection practices, establishing a new conceptual framework that expands our understanding of HR practices. This framework may add the missing dimension to the selection literature wherein aesthetics play an essential role – not least when selecting for people with the right taste, expression or 'feel' and contribute to closing the HR scholar-practitioner gap.

Looking at HR selection from an aesthetic perspective provides insights into the processes of selection based on precognitive, non-discursive, 'vaguely conceivable' skills that are experienced intuitively. Similar debates about the importance of aesthetics in hiring and how employers utilize the aesthetics of their staff as a source of competitive advantage exist in the literature about aesthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007), emphasizing the importance of managing the way employees look, feel and behave (see, Hochschild, 1983; Warhurst et al., 2000; Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). These debates were important, providing new facets of what it can mean to be 'skilled' (Grugulis et al., 2004). These are issues that this paper is related to, but also distinctive from. These previous debates center on aesthetic 'appearance' such as: 'grooming, dress sense, deportment, manner, tone and accent of voice and shape and size of body' (Grugulis et al., 2004: 7). This paper diverts attention away from physical appearance to candidates' aesthetic knowledge as an intuitive expertise or skill: 'based on people's experience, and that people's experience differs' (Hogarth,

2001: 23). Although intuitive skills are individually experienced, they are embedded and learned socially in communities of practitioners allowing increasing insightfulness into the given practice. (Gherardi, 2009).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a literature review guiding the reader through the different dominant perspectives within HR selection, followed by a theoretical background about John Dewey's aesthetic experience centering on intuition as imagination. Thirdly, I outline the study's methodology and main features of the Danish film industry as the empirical context. I then proceed to reveal the findings of the paper that point to three iterative selection practices that emphasize the role of aesthetic experience in HR selection. The paper concludes with contributions that critically debate how aesthetics can inform HR professionals in selection processes and potentially provide a more nuanced perspective on selection and can potentially help close the gap between HRM practitioners and scholars.

HR selection

Traditional HRM selection literature is based on the overall idea that the best candidate for the job is found through rational and measurable means, matching the organization's need for specific well-defined skills with the most appropriate applicant. Emotions and sense-based knowledge have not been accepted or recognized as part of selection practices.

Firstly, I would like to clarify the concepts and differences between recruitment and selection. While recruitment is defined as 'practices and activities that organizations undertake to attract quality applicants to an organization' e.g. human resource planning, identifying market segments and attracting the right job applicants (Klotz et al., 2013: 104), selection is defined as 'the process of collecting and evaluating information about an individual or group of individuals in order to (initiate) or extend an offer of employment' (Gatewood et al., 2010: 3).

This paper focuses strictly on selection. The standard process used for selection contains – with small theoretical variations – the following tasks: firstly, a primary sorting of candidates, based on their CV's and applications. Secondly, sorting through valid selection procedures and tools, and based on these tests, selection of the few top candidates for the job. Thirdly, proceeding with these top candidates to other, often more qualitative assessment tools, and finally based on these assessments making a rational choice about the best candidate, who will be offered the job (Larsen 2010).

Within the selection literature, four perspectives are identified; the psychometric approach, the competency based approach, the social process approach and the practice-based approach.

Within the psychometric approach, grounded in psychology, the emphasis is on rational choice, testing, improving validity and reliability in the methods and measurements utilized to select candidates. This approach has, like the rest of society, developed towards increasing rationalization, and as a result overemphasizes the importance of validity and reliability in methods forecasting individuals' job performance (see for example, Rynes et al., 2002; Lievens et al., 2002; Dudley et al., 2006; Hogan and Holland, 2003). Later debates within the psychometric approach focus on improving and refining the validity and reliability of tests (see for example, Hough and Oswald, 2008; Bäckström et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2015) and more recently emphasizing the avoidance of deception and faking in tests (Schneider and Goffin, 2012; Fell et al., 2016; Feeney and Goffin, 2015; Fine and Pirak, 2015; Lievens, 2015).

The second approach mainly championed by management scholars, is the competency based approach that emphasizes the need to better integrate employee resourcing to the business strategy (Chanda et al., 2010; Orlitzky, 2007). This requires ensuring a fit between the employee and the organization rather than matching them to the specific job (Bowen et al., 2001). In order to do this, organizations must perform strategic personnel planning and find a match to the skills, qualifications, attributes and characteristics offered by the various job candidates (Taylor and Collins, 2000; Millmore, 2003), ensuring that recruiters know the company goals and align those vertically and horizontally when recruiting (Phillips and Gully, 2015).

The third approach is the social process approach; it supports the use of tests, while pointing out that invalid tests serve a function of supporting the establishment of a psychological contract. They suggest that attempts at rational practices will always be skewed because the information available is limited and manipulated, which problematizes the idea of technical rationality (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004; Herriot, 1993) despite the intent to perform 'realistic recruitment' (Wanous, 2006). Both the competency based and the social process approach buy into the same key assumptions about selecting for the right fit, as those found in the psychometric approach. This presumes that skills can be measured and matched to predefined needs, goals and values, by utilizing methods such as tests and interviews to measure the candidates.

The fourth, practice-based, approach states the importance of deviation from tests and consideration of the context, by understanding how selection is practiced *in*

situ. As pointed out by Van Vianen (2000), in practice, fit assessment is often based on the impression of the applicants' personality, knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) more than on formalized tests and measurements. Hence tests are only used to justify decisions already made much earlier in the process (Ambadi and Rosenthal, 1993; Silverman and Jones 1973, 1976; Kreiner, 2012). Rynes et al. (2002), through their study of 1000 HR VP's, managers and directors, show that HR practitioners disbelieve or are unaware of essential findings within the psychometric research e.g. the forecasting of job performance through testing (Rynes et al., 2002: 2007). From this perspective, focus is placed on the gap between tests and ideal processes and how selection is performed in practice (Anderson et al., 2001; Silverman and Jones, 1973, 1976; Bolander and Sandberg, 2007). Some of the debates evolve around themes such as: employee's perceptions and the mutual evaluation of employers and job candidates (Ryan and Ployhart, 2000; Diab et al., 2011), the role of rumors in hiring (Dalal et al., 2015), selecting for emotional compatibility to job function (Woodruffe, 2006), the role of gut feeling in selection processes (Miles and Sadler-Smith, 2014; Highhouse, 2008; Klimoski and Jones, 2008; Kreiner, 2012), and how selection decisions are made within a social context (Bolander and Sandberg 2013; Lockyer and Scholarios, 2007; Silverman and Jones, 1973, 1976). Despite claims from the psychometric researchers, that this gap has been increasingly closed over the last decade with improved test validity and reliability (Bäckström et al., 2009), this seems not to be the case (Bolander and Sandberg, 2013). Instead, a form of practical knowledge unfolding in situ is in play, which can be difficult to rationalize and discursively express. This paper accompanies the latter practice-based literature stream by seeking to understand how it is possible to select for aesthetic skills that are difficult to express discursively and objectively test.

Theoretical stance and concepts: Aesthetic experience, intuition and imagination

The concept of aesthetics has many ambiguous meanings and scholars have not yet come to a conceptual agreement (Shusterman, 2006). Overall, the term aesthetics can be understood from two different perspectives. The first perceives aesthetics as 'beauty' which implies that aesthetics exist objectively in the object itself, on its own terms. In opposition to this is the view of aesthetics as a subjective experience or perception of an object (Stolnitz, 1960: 32-36). The perspective taken in this paper is that of pragmatist aesthetics, established by John Dewey in his work 'art as experience'. It belongs to the latter perspective, implying that while aesthetics are subjectively felt, they are, however, social to the core and can never be isolated from the experience in a specific context (Dewey, 1934). Aesthetics is a vague signifier concerning knowledge that is created from our sensory

experiences. It both engages with and feeds into the conceptually opposing idea of rational knowledge (Dewey, 1958; Gagliardi, 1996). This sensory knowledge is apprehended through our senses, derived from the experience of being in the world. The pragmatist's stance has a strong linkage with the practical and implies that aesthetics will always be part of the way in which we experience the world. Furthermore the concept and insights to selection practices provided in this paper are may help to solve the practical problems of selection in practice, and hence attempt bridge the HR practitioner-theory gap. Dewey defines aesthetics as:

That what refers [...] to experience as appreciative, perceiving and enjoying, words indicating the inherent connection to experience, from which it can never be identified in isolated form. (Dewey, 1934: 49)

Aesthetics is an inherently integrated part of experiencing and, as such, can never be understood in isolation from experience. In Dewey's (1934) perspective, experience plays a central role in which action and environment is interlinked. Materials have inner natural demarcations that imply that people have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. E.g. the film came to an end, or the book was written. The experience stands out from 'life' as one long experiencing, because of what comes before and after. This rounding out of an experience that gives it a sense of completeness has an aesthetic quality. It distinguishes that experience from other experiences because every material has its own aesthetic quality which implies that it has an interest and a course of fulfillment that allows it to be demarked from that what comes before and after. Dewey emphasizes that emotions are manifested in experience, and he stated that:

[They are the] moving and cementing force of having an experience [...] It [emotions] selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color. (*Ibid.*: 43ff)

However, they are constantly evolving with the experience and hence can never be understood separate from this experience): 'Experience is emotional but there is no separate thing called emotions in it' (*Ibid.*: 43ff). Emotions are not the experience itself but feeds into the experience and without emotions people would be unable to make distinctions that enable them to make sense of the world.

Dewey builds on this argument and defines a new term 'aesthetic experience'. An aesthetic experience is distinct and stands out from the stream of ordinary humdrum experiences we have in life. It is outstanding because of an intensified feeling of affect that appears in this type of experience that is activated with all senses in play, avoiding the separation of observation, action and foresight. It is a state of mind and knowledge, experienced as intuition and imagination (*Ibid.*)

Now moving closer to the core of this argument in order to operationalize this framework to explain how people experience and hence make judgement of candidates in selection, the following sections elaborate on two essential concepts of perception, namely intuition and imagination.

Dewey describes intuition as a precognitive state of knowing that determines whether objects become accepted and noticed in thought or remains cognitively unnoticed. It goes beyond that of expressive reasoning. Intuition is: 'that meeting of old and new in which readjustment involved in every form, of consciousness is effected suddenly by means of a quick and unexpected harmony, which in its bright abruptness is like a flash of revelation' (Dewey, 1934: 266). It appears as a moment of an intensive aha- experience: 'like sparks, when poles are adjusted, there is intuition' (*Ibid.*: 266). Although this seems like an abrupt experience, like a moment of truth, it is based on a slow enduring process of interest below the surface. Inseparable from this is judgement that can never be objective as it is always based on an experience of someone. This implies that subject-matter of perception is all that makes the difference in judgement. The material enters into our experience, and is therefore never objective:

Criticism is judgement. The material out of which judgement grows is the work, the object, as it enters into the experience of the critic by interaction with his own sensitivity and his knowledge and funded store from past experiences. (*Ibid.*: 322)

This underlines that judgement will vary with both the material and the prior knowledge that enters into experience. Judgement also implies being engaged in prior experiences with the tradition (*Ibid.*) or practice (Gherardi, 2012; Hennion, 2007). Dewey describes this as interest that provides a 'rich and developed background which, whether it be painting in the field of poetry, or music, cannot be achieved except by consistent nurture of interest' (Dewey, 1934: 277). This background of experiences provides a foundation for which the person can experience. Although having an experience is individually perceived, it is never solely individual as it connects to a community or a tradition. The experienced practitioner, bases decision making on a skillful probing of the material which purchases a deeper, more informed response and with it the possibility of greater, more intense gratification, which can be conceptualized as 'aesthetic skills' (Smith and Smith, 1977).

Dewey develops the concept of intuition further, into the more specific concept of imagination, 'when the old and familiar things are made new in experience there is imagination' (1934: 178). Imagination implies seeing things as they compose an integral whole, and a transformation from the particular to the universal. It is an image of 'things-that-might-be' and a 'tapping of a situation's possibilities', that at that moment in time is not present but a desired future state that is not yet

actualized. Therefore, in that moment of time, imagination is also realizing ‘what is not present’. It takes action for the idea to transform and be ‘shown’, and in the act of trying out the idea, the idea is transformed into a different appearance from the one prior to the action. Imagination, in other words, signifies: ‘the capacity to concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be’ (*Ibid.*: 278) and can bring to light undisclosed possibilities inherent in the situation at hand. The image created in imagination provides a desire that guides the direction for actions. Dewey elaborates this in the temporal understanding of the concept:

So far as we refer a value backward, so far as we are thinking of it with reference to its origin, it is sensation. We create a figurative image as we are thinking of it with reference to what we are going to do – not the object that we had, but the object that we want to get. (*Ibid.*: 278)

Aesthetic experience as imagination breaks with the traditional understanding that every conscious experience has some imaginative quality. Instead Dewey emphasizes that conscious experience happens in interaction with the environment, and the only gateway that adds means and meaning of past experiences to these interactions is imagination. This is the only way in which the here and now can be bridged with past experiences (*Ibid.*).

The Danish Film Industry as research context

The film industry represents an extreme case of intuitive selection practices (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It provides access to studying the intuitive aspects of selection, as these are more accepted here (Coget, 2014) and hence more pronounced and overt. This does not make intuitive selection a phenomenon that only appears in creative industries.

The Danish film industry is a small but segmented industry, with a surplus supply of qualified film freelance workers, who are hired when needed and matched for project-specific skills instead of company-specific skills (Bielby and Bielby, 1999). On many projects entire team constellations from prior movies are hired, in so called semi-permanent work relations (Blair, 2003) or project networks (Burt, 2004). Despite these social structures organizing the work, changes arise due to unavailability, or desire for renewal and innovative expressions, and often results in new team constellations being established (Stjerne and Svejnova, 2016; Mathieu and Stjerne, 2012).

In the Danish film industry, recruitment is an informal process with no formal job advertisements or job applications in the traditional sense. It is based on informal social networks, wherein people are recommended through word of mouth (Blair,

2003; Jones, 1996). This makes reputation essential in selection, as indicated by the film industry's well-known saying: 'you are only as good as your last production' (Blair, 2001). At the Danish Film Institute, there is a book that includes the names, phone numbers and addresses of all film workers sorted by professions. This can also be found on the home page of the Danish Film Institute and the International Movie Data Base (IMDB), which makes it easy to track down and contact all film workers in the Danish film industry when needed. It also allows an overview of which film projects people have worked on, indicating work experience and with whom they collaborate, indicating their taste community (Mathieu and Stjerne, 2012) which can vaguely indicate if that person could fit to the project.

A film can be divided into 4 different stages; pre-production, production, post-production and distribution. The producers execute most recruitment and selection within the project (Baker and Faulkner, 1991: 283) in the first phase during preproduction. At this stage, the film travels from being a vast idea and vision to a story line. This is further concretized into a manuscript and other visual materials, encompassing team lists, cast, materials and time plans approximating the production phase. All projects are initiated with an idea, coming from one function belonging to the 'creative triangle' that comprises a director, manuscript writer and producer. The project owner, most commonly the producer or director, takes initiative to bring onboard the other members of the creative triangle and later on, as the project develops, the main functional posts are distributed – for example, cinematographer, costume, production designer, and makeup artist. These main functional posts are essential aesthetic contributors to the final product (Becker, 1984) and consequently essential key players when assembling for aesthetics because they in totality carry the main artistic responsibility in the film production. After the project is granted production money, the main functional posts on the film often get to select their own sub-team within their department e.g. the cinematographer selects her/his sub-functions.

Methodology and data collection

Data for this paper was collected as multi-sited ethnography with an emphasis on aesthetic in practices (Gherardi, 2006). Observing judgements of aesthetic skills in selection practices is problematic because intuitive knowledge is most often, as previously mentioned, an internal embodied process. The main focus in my ethnographic practice based study was, as suggested by Davide Nicolini (2012) and Silviya Gherardi (2012), on the senses, such as: touching, hearing, seeing, tasting and feeling, especially in situations of decision making and selection. This study was conducted with five focal points: aesthetic judgements, materials, temporality

and on the reproduction vs. renewal of practices. The Danish film industry as a case provided a context where emotions and intuition is more pronounced and accepted (Coget, 2014) because aesthetics is at the forefront of the product that is being developed. I experienced that intuiting in selection is a recognized and openly debated aspect of the decision making process, regarding whom to hire as well as whom not to hire. Observations were supplemented with informal dinner conversations and unstructured in-depth interviews with key decision-makers from all of the film projects followed, resulting in 30 interviews conducted with 22 informants.

When seeking to observe selection practices in this process it is a question of where, when and whom to start observing. Taking on a processual methodology in order to understand the evolution of how selection happens is essential as these practices can endure over a period of time. This is a crucial factor because, as Dewey explains, despite intuition being seemingly immediate, it is based on a slow enduring process of interest occurring beneath the surface of daily experience. Taking on a processual methodology entails that we as researchers always enter 'in the middle of action', and therefore the definition of a neatly outlined methodology a priori, would be a mistake. Instead we need to go there and investigate. I started this investigation about the film industry in 2009 doing research about creative careers in film, interviewing 42 of the most prominent film workers from the Danish film industry. At this point, I learned that producers, in consultation with the director, are the ones that select those to occupy the main functional posts of the film. Reentering the field in 2013, I decided to follow different projects within different film production companies that vary greatly in taste and market segment. Within these different settings, I followed various film projects through their preproduction stage where the main selection of the main functional posts takes place. The duration of this study was from August to November 2013, and was augmented by reentering one of the production companies' film projects during the last part of preproduction from January to February 2014. The main locations of my research took place in the production room and at the lunch table of the production companies, and in different film-related sites in Copenhagen.

Findings: Selecting people through aesthetic experience

This analysis reveals how aesthetic experiences, which is often intuitive as it is the intensified immediacy that occur when poles meet. Intuition is defined as 'knowledge of a state of mind' (Dewey, 1934: 299). Imagination is a kind of intuition. Imagination played an essential role on the practices of selecting candidates to fill the creative main functional posts for different film projects in the Danish film industry. It highlights the practices of selecting candidates with

the right tastes and expression (aesthetic skills) matching the vision (a future prospect of what should become) of the creative project and the people already on board. The selection process contains three different practices that should be understood as iterative and ultimately constituting a basis for deciding on the final candidate. I have conceptualized the first practices as *imagining*, which is the ability to create an image of the candidates' future performance in a given project or context. The second practice is *exchanging aesthetic knowledge*, which implies gaining input for potential candidates from others through a shared vocabulary that is based on prior film references and metaphors. The third practice is *listing*, which is performed to get potential top candidates on the list appraised by trusted former partners, and can be perceived as a final quality control.

Selection is the process of matching candidates to projects. It comprises iterative processes that include three practices that can never be separated into sequential well-defined steps, but should instead be understood as iterative processes continued until the aesthetic experience appears that intuitively enables a decision, as it points to the right candidate. The following analyses show, through examples of selection in different film projects, that selection cannot be carried out as a merely rational process isolated from aesthetic experience.

Searching for aesthetic skills and selection methods

The challenge of seeking to apply traditional selection practices when selecting for aesthetic skills was explicated when a young producer was selecting her core team in the youth-TV comedy series named 'Sjit happens'. This production was striving for innovation within the Danish comedy genre, which required new unexplored talents to be found and hired. The production was initiated by a producer together with the person appointed head of the manuscript department. When selecting the core team, especially the other manuscript writers and directors, it was difficult finding someone available with the necessary experience and the right taste and style. First of all the project still only existed as a vision (Styhre, 2009) with all its serendipity and suspense, and hence the necessary skills were blurry. As the producers in charge of selecting the team stated:

There was nothing that resembled what we wanted to create, and that which existed [within comedy] wasn't really funny or cool. And... [the few] who had already proven their worth..., we didn't want to pick because then it becomes the same all over again. So we preferred gambling on someone new. (Producer interview, 2013, Fridthjof Film)

The producer was looking for someone just one level beneath the famous names that everybody knows, and a shortlist of five experienced and five inexperienced writers was created in order to live up to the coproduction company's (ZULU)

demands. The producer explained that the perfect candidate, who ultimately got the job, had already been on her mind from the very beginning, but because of lack of experience had been 'parked' in the line of maybes at the early selection stage. The producer thought that the level of experience was important to the stakeholder at ZULU and in the time after the producer was asking trusted partners both from within the production firm, their network of collaboration partners from previous movies and important cofounders of the project, who they thought would be the right candidate for the filmic vision of the project. She looked into previous movies and TV series within the comedy genre, seeking to find someone interesting and attempting to make a list of other relevant film workers. She looked into the data based on rationally defined parameters, seeking to follow a more traditional HR selection process. In this process she tried to arrange people from the online databases of the DFI and IMDB systematically, drawing on their relevant experience and what films they were working on at that moment. Looking back at this process the producer stated that:

It's not like I look into the DFI book, or sometimes I do... [this time she did]. It's actually as if you look into some foggy stuff... I was actually attempting to make a small list but then no! I really didn't feel that there was anyone other than him who had precisely what I wanted. (Producer interview, 2013, Fridthjof Film)

In this, it is clear that the producer had already found the right candidate, but due to their lack of experience she needed to continue her search and the candidate was 'parked' in the back of mind. The producer afterwards tried to follow a rational approach of ordering other candidates into a list according to measurable parameters. She was continuously searching and imagining how different candidates would interpret and carry out the vision of 'Sjit happens'. One day in a meeting with the manager from ZULU, they talked about potential candidates and the manager suggested the person who had already been identified and 'parked' because of lack of experience:

It's evidently as if a lightning struck... When I later on came to think about him, I then thought, 'of course its him!'... It's like wow... [a revelation]. (Producer interview, 2013; Fridthjof Film)

The producer learned through a thorough and in-depth search over time that no other candidate had more fitting experience than the candidate she had already considered at the beginning of the selection process. The database did not prove useful for making a list, as it does not provide any indicators of people's aesthetic skills that can provide an experience from which to judge and select.

They ended up hiring two directors, one with vast experience – who was recommended by ZULU and seemed just right for the job – and the 'newcomer' who intuitively seemed right. However, his identified potential was not sufficient

in itself, because the investors didn't have the same insight into the vision and the market as the producer had at the time. This challenge was solved by creating a shared position. When producing the second season of 'Sjit happens' the 'newcomer' was rehired, while the experienced director had pulled the genre in an overly dramatic direction, and was therefore not rehired, causing a very delicate and emotional situation. It cannot be argued rationally why the newcomer seemed right, it is intuitively felt, but as Dewey explains it is based on a *longue-durée* interest (Dewey, 1934). In this case, an interest in creating a filmic universe, identifying and always openly sensing the environment with this specific interestedness, encountering objects and people that match them, imagining the possible match between those seeking out an aesthetic experience through this process. Instead of selecting based on measurable means, the process was iterative; involving the exchange of aesthetic references, imagining and listing.

Exchanging aesthetic references

In order to get suggestions for candidates, producers seek input from trusted partners in their social networks. People present ideas and visions for each other on a daily basis and discuss films as small talk in the morning, over lunch etc. As a result, many ideas and aesthetics coexist and people work on many different projects in different teams at once. Such conversations often took place around the lunch table. As exemplified in the following interaction between two female directors Vibeke and Lone that I observed during a lunch meeting at the Danish film school (June, 2011):

V: Do you know an editor who is funny?

L: Yes I know someone who is definitely funny [Lone provides name]

V: Is he funny? I didn't think so.

L: Yes he is funny when you get to know him.

In an interview afterwards it became clear that funny didn't mean 'humorous', but 'untraditional':

...funny, yes but I could also have chosen a different word. With funny I mean untraditional.... an editor who comes up with funny, untraditional ideas (Director Interview, 2012).

At Nimbus film, I observed a discussion between two producers. 'I am looking for a production designer who can do 'Rubber Tarzan' (a Danish children's cartoon) meets 'Iron man'. These are two different film references used to guide the colleague who presumably has watched the films, and has the aesthetic skill to

draw the aesthetic signifier from those movies and imagines it as a personal skill of someone who could potentially produce that specific filmic expression. The essential part is being able to verbalize what you mean: ‘it’s not enough to say for instance that you want something to be luxurious, you need to clarify what you mean...’ (Producer Interview, 2013, Nimbus Film) and having a shared vocabulary implies also having shared references – or a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) – of which films you like and dislike. Therefore, colleagues are trusted partners for giving references for selection, as they have exchanged such preferences and discussed likes and dislikes based on discussions over lunch.

Exchanging references was also used as a replacement for the formal interview, often used as the third step in standard HR selection. In this process the short listed top-two (or three) candidates were tested aesthetically by sending them the manuscript and meeting them subsequently to discuss their interpretation and possible contribution to the film. At Nimbus Film, the project ‘Antboy II’ was looking for a production designer and two different candidates were in contention. They were both invited to show up for a meeting where the vision was communicated and the director sat down and exchanged references to test for an aesthetic match. The crucial aspect of discussion came down to the repertoire of filmic references used. As the director stated in an interview after having made the decision:

One of the references he used is one that everybody in the industry uses when people don’t really know where to position something, when something falls in between genres and it’s not really clear where it fits in. (Director, interview, 2014, Nimbus Film)

This was interpreted as revealing a lack of commitment, vision or common language, where the director thought that the production designer with his experience level would be able to come up with more precise interpretations and references for the direction of the movie. The director had a very clear vision about a genre mix, combining a hero film with a twist of social realism. Therefore, the vague reference didn’t establish a common ground or provide any insights as to how the candidate interpreted the director’s vision and what aesthetics he would add to the project. The other references to movies he used were more in the direction of social realism and didn’t match the vision of the director. Because of this perceived lack, he was not selected for the job. This gap was elaborated further in an interview with the producers of the project:

Yes, and it is very far from the direction [name of director] wanted to pull it in, so it was very clear that the position of tastes, or the vision for where they wanted to go with this concept were too far from each other. (Producer, Interview, 2014, Nimbus Film)

The other less experienced production designer got the job because she managed to interpret the taste of the director in relation to the vision of the 'Antboy II' film project and match it to her own taste. She came up with references to other movies that made it clear to the director that she intended in creating a 'larger than life universe' that did not fall within the widely established practice in the social realism genre in the Danish film industry. The production designer used references from movies that successfully mixed social realism with an adventure universe, especially those drawing on an American 'larger than life' look.

Imagining

Imagination combines the vision and the candidate's aesthetic into an abstract whole. This image provides an aesthetic experience and hence enables an aesthetic judgement as the experience inevitably provokes feelings that lead to judgement. Imagination implies envisioning how peoples' tastes would interact with the vision of the project, where this interaction creates a unique expression of the filmic product. The manuscript in play is always interpreted and communicated through the eyes of the film worker. There are many ways in which the words of a manuscript can be translated into a visible filmic expression, and hence it is essential to find someone with the right aesthetic skills:

... When you read a manuscript you can express yourself a million ways... The way you act can range from being very theatrical, to scenes where they don't say a word...[another directors name] would have made it much more rough and fierce, where Natasha is more sensitive in her expression. (Executive producer interview, 2013, Fridthjof Film)

Imagination, as that which is not there yet but is potentially there to become, is created as an image in the mind that is the aesthetic experience. This is what allows people to experience an image of the person working in the project. In an interview with two of the 'Antboy II' producers they reflected on their own practices, performed when selecting candidates.

...it's about being able to imagine the movie in hindsight before you make it with the director in question in mind. How would that film or that product look like filtered through that person..., that is what you have to be able to see... Sometimes you can think that something you read is terribly mundane and boring, but then 'ahh, okay!' With his or her take on things added, it becomes something completely different. (Producer interview, 2013, Nimbus Film)

It is never solely a matter of the person, although personality is undeniably important. It is always about the image produced in connecting the person's aesthetic skills to the vision of the project. Imagination is needed, and this qualified probing of the object is essential for finding the right candidate for the vision of the project. The aesthetic skills acquired in the process of becoming a

skillful practitioner instills experience that allows for the possibility of greater, more intense understanding of the object. It is a sensitizing of this imagination that allows qualified decisions to be made.

Listing candidates

Listing was an attempt to rank candidates into a prioritized order, which was at times difficult or directly impossible, but nonetheless necessary in order to have more options in case that the first choice was not interested, or was preoccupied with other projects. Listing was an attempt at making a more rational selection process that included all options available. Often the lists were written as an outcome of the other aesthetic practices and hence they resembled more an attempt to qualify the outcome of these prior processes. These lists were used to add rational parameters, often to legitimize that all options had been considered rationally and candidates had been ranked. These lists also allowed the further practices of recruiting people to be outsourced to assistants that did not have the necessary aesthetic skills.

Discussion

This study provided insights into the role of aesthetic experience in HR selection practices in several film projects within the Danish film industry, delving into the iterative processes of 1) exchanging aesthetic references, 2) imagining and 3) listing candidates which may lead to having an aesthetic experience that allow for selecting the right candidate (see figure 1 below)

Exchanging aesthetic references shows that through a shared vocabulary, decision makers share the vision of the project and seek input for suitable candidates from trusted collaboration partners with whom they have shared experiences, both from prior collaborations on projects but also as a shared knowledge base of common movies they have watched. In this process, these references allow a newly informed imagination to take place when the trusted partner gives input on a future state of the desired vision, communicated by references to previously shared experiences.

Imagination is a practice that allows decision makers to link past experiences with the future vision of the project as well as potential candidates for positions. Since the candidate and the project are potential future happenings, imagination enables bridging the past and future in a figurative image that can be judged as a new object created in mind, providing a new experience rather than merely isolated experiences of the movie or the person on their own. This is why sometimes a project that at first seems boring can become very interesting when another candidate is added to the future image.

Listing is a practice that seeks to rank candidates in prioritized order. Some of the imagined candidates do not provoke the same aesthetic experience in the decision maker as with their trusted partner. In some cases, the adjustment of past experiences and future projections of the vision never meet and the decision maker is stuck. In the case of 'Sjit Happens' the response to this happening was to search for further information in databases. This did not provide any input for imagination, as it did not offer any qualitative and aesthetic information, which was necessary to imagine the candidate in relation to a specific product.

These three concepts are interconnected and link to aesthetic experience in the following manner (see figure 1). Exchanging aesthetic references is the first step in which repertoires of references are shared in a more general term of liking and disliking, but also on more specific interpretations of the vision. This enables imagination, in which the vision and the candidate's aesthetics are merged into an abstract image. This image provokes feelings that enable judgement which leads to the process of listing candidates into a preferred order. The process of imagining and listing happens in an ongoing interplay that continues until it leads to aesthetic experience that allow for the final decision of which candidate to offer the job. Aesthetic experience is what allows judgement to happen. This can never be anything but inter-subjective, as skills are experienced by people in a context and often in work-related settings with professionals who have learned socially through previously shared experiences in a community. These values have been intrinsically embedded so that people feel and act on them, without necessarily being conscious of them entering into their experience base and emotions. If no images create an aesthetic experience often more candidates are brought in-and the selection process starts over.

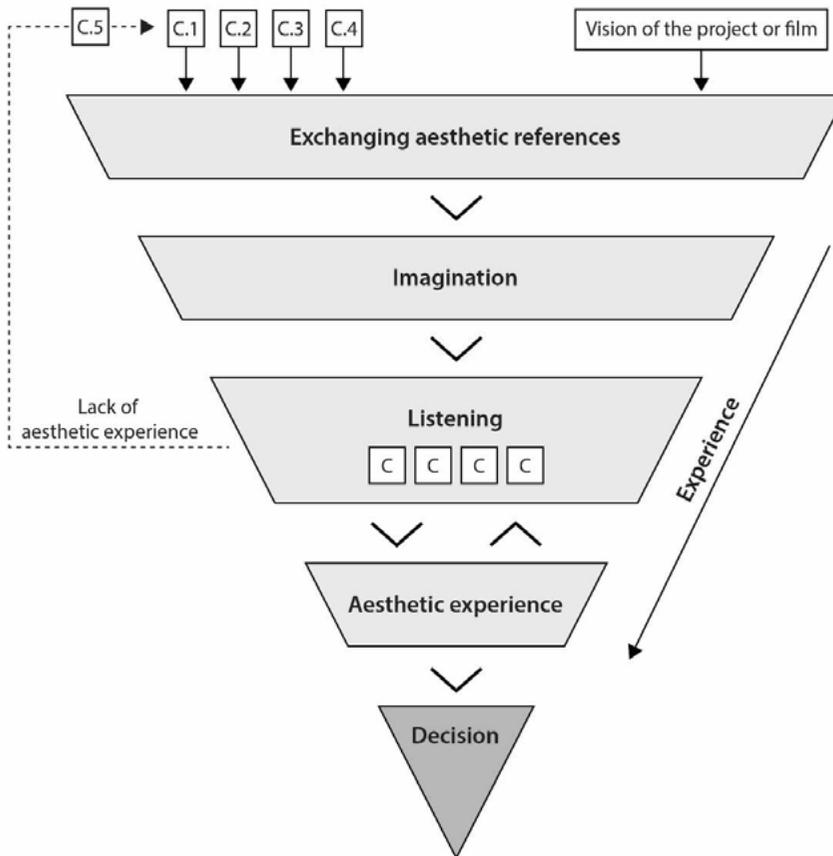


Figure 1: The process of aesthetic selection

The importance of selecting for aesthetic skills has been largely overlooked by both scholars and practitioners, which is a result of the dominance and spread of rational, scientific approaches escalating with professionalization of HRM (Bevort and Poulfelt, 2015). The relatively large amount of practitioners who admit to sticking with intuition as a selection practice have been criticized for ignoring the scientific proof that tests and rational methods create more successful selections (Highhouse, 2008). Intuition is still an unresolved issue and is perceived as the ‘elephant in the room’ in HR practice (Myers, 2002: 189, in Miles and Sadler-Smith, 2014). The reason for HR practitioners still depending on their intuitive overall impression when making selection decisions has in prior research been explained by various means such as: up-front cost reduction and dismissing the risk of long term costs that follows poor selection decisions (see Fisher, 2008; Klimoski and Jones, 2008). This paper offers a different answer to this puzzle, and seeks to provide new concepts and a framework that is closer to practice. The paper

adds a new perspective of imagination that points to the aesthetic and temporal dimensions of HR selection. Although this study has been carried out in the film industry, that has many unique features – for example that it is project-based, that artistic products emphasize aesthetics and that recruitment happens without CVs and based on social networks. As already stated, the film industry is an extreme case that enables a closer look into these practices. However, the concepts and framework developed in these findings contributes to companies in other industries for several reasons: Firstly, in most industries candidates are hired by drawing on recommendations from social networks. Secondly, hiring decisions are rarely based on a CV (Granovetter, 1973). Thirdly, jobs define people and people define jobs (Boxall, 2013) which makes the future outcome serendipitous with similarities to hiring for imagined visions in projects. Last, but not least, creative industries are unique in the sense that their products are aesthetic to their very core, however as for any material product, it will be just as important to imagine potential candidates in relation to such a product. Therefore, when matching jobs and candidates, aesthetic experience as imagination becomes essential as decision makers need to close the temporal gap. This may be even more prominent in industries organized around projects, where people are hired into these projects.

It is more questionable as to what extent the practice of exchanging aesthetic references can be found in other industries, as this requires a common language that is social and conscious to people in the company/industry. Similar knowledge is often embedded in the stories of the company and taps into cultural aspects that can also be understood as a common experience background (Dewey, 1934), an understanding more generally applicable across different industries.

Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004), show the potential benefits in bringing out the best of intuition and seeking to avoid the pitfalls. They contend that intuition provides an opportunity to turn ideas into action and speed up decision-making. By bringing intuitive practices out into the open and providing concepts with which to talk about them, the pitfalls of unconscious and un-reflected intuitive decision-making can be reduced. ‘The concomitant danger is that if intuition is continually suppressed, it may cease to operate or may be driven underground’ (*Ibid.*: 25), as is the case in many current HR selection practices. This situation is dangerous because intuition then operates underneath the surface, which promotes the well-known segmentation problem in both organizations and in society in general (Tilly and Tilly, 1994). This study, however, provides an insight into the intuitive practices that enables in-depth insight and provides a vocabulary to talk about such intuitive practices, which may be useful to HRM practitioners. This paper responds to the recent call for empirical descriptive papers about how intuition-based hiring decisions are made and why intuition is still important for practitioners (Slaughter and Kausel, 2014), as it elaborates empirically on how

aesthetic experience is part of HR selection practices, while adding new concepts to the aesthetic dimension of HR selection process. This concurs with the study by Bolander and Sandberg (2013) that emphasizes the importance of understanding the practices of 'how selection happens in practice'. I contribute to this stance by adding the dimension of 'aesthetic HR selection in practice'. This paper contributes a new framework and concepts that expand our current understanding of HR practices. This debate has primarily argued that practitioners use intuition in contexts that lack hard data, or where the data available is not perceived to be useful, or to be less useful than in more formalized contexts requiring competency-based assessment and quantifiable results.

Conclusion

The central issue with which this paper seeks to engage is the current theory-practitioner gap that exists within HR selection. Much of the current selection theory has overemphasized the importance of tests and rational measurements, as it assumes that future job performance can be measured through valid tests of job candidates. However, studies on how practitioners carry out selection in practice show that these practices happen in a very different and more intuitive manner. This paper has reintroduced aesthetic experience into this perspective and brought in an essential aspect that is essential to any decision process, as aesthetic experience can never be separated from judgement. Through a study on the Danish film industry three inter-linked practices and concepts were identified: 1) exchanging aesthetic references, 2) imagining and 3) listing candidates. These insights on how aesthetics are carried out in the practice of selection bring the theories closer to practice where aesthetics can never be separated, as suggested by many of the previous selection theories. The findings call for more studies from different industries on the role of aesthetics in selection and not least intrinsic aesthetic skills. This is by no means a blind declaration into the pitfalls of selection based on intuition without seeking to limit biases. Rather, it is a declaration of a severe need to include aesthetics into HR selection theory, in order to give HR practitioners a language and enabling them to work and develop – not just with the rational aspects in tests, that have been highlighted so thoroughly, but also with the aesthetic skills that are inherently part of HR selection.

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